United Nations

Press Release

Department of Public Information • News Coverage Service • New York

Prepared by Central News

DH/850
19 March 1991

TUESDAY HIGHLIGHTS

- Under-Secretary-General Martti Ahtisaari reports of "extremely serious situation in Iraq".

- Iraq agrees to entrust Office of Secretary-General with exchange of Kuwaiti property.

- World Health Organization expresses concern about pollution caused by burning Kuwaiti oil wells.

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The Spokesman for the Secretary-General told correspondents today that the head of the United Nations humanitarian mission to Iraq and Kuwait, Under-Secretary-General Martti Ahtisaari, was flying back to New York today to report to Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar on the "extremely serious situation in Iraq".

The Spokesman told correspondents yesterday that Mr. Ahtisaari had not been able to proceed immediately to Kuwait, because of accommodation problems in particular. The Secretary-General had therefore asked him to return to New York to report to him first hand on the situation in Iraq. The Spokesman said the team travelling with Mr. Ahtisaari had been left behind in Bahrain waiting for the green light from the Kuwaiti authorities. Mr. Ahtisaari would be returning to Kuwait as soon as conditions permitted, he said.

Asked by correspondents about the contents of the report, the Spokesman referred to a press release issued today by the International Committee of the Red Cross stating that wider action for the area was urgently needed to avert famine in Iraq. Alarmed by the situation, the Committee was in close contact with the United Nations over the measures that needed to be taken.

The press release said further that the Red Cross was stepping up its food distributions to vulnerable groups in Iraq and that since January it had brought nearly 900 tonnes of food into Iraq from Jordan and Iran.

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The Committee said priority distributions were being made to hospitals and orphanages in Baghdad. It also planned to extend distributions to other areas as well.

The Spokesman said Mr. Ahtisaari's report was also describing the problems in Iraq as extremely serious with no electricity and fuel, and grave telecommunication and transportation difficulties.

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Iraq has agreed that the Office of the Secretary-General should be entrusted with the receipt and delivery of Kuwaiti property. In a letter yesterday to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council, Iraqi Ambassador Abdul Amir Al-Anbari said Iraq was awaiting "the machinery decided upon" in order to deliver the confiscated property.

In a separate letter, Mr. Al-Anbari said that the catalogues of the assets of the Islamic Museum and the National Museum that were brought to Iraq from Kuwait were ready for submission to the authority that may be designated.

The Iraqi Ambassador also notified the United Nation about the situation of Kuwaiti aircraft. While seven had been destroyed by allied bombing, eight planes remained intact -- six in Iran, one in Oman and one in Iraq, he said.

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The World Health Organization (WHO) has expressed concern about the extent of pollution caused by burning Kuwaiti oil wells.

A United Nations press officer in Geneva said today that WHO had reported that black rain had fallen on parts of Iran last week. The Organization said that pollution from the burning oil wells continued to increase the environmental health hazards in Jordan and the Gulf States.

The press officer said that WHO reported that destruction of sanitation, waste water and treatment facilities would mean an influx of solid and chemical waste into lands, rivers and sea that would further damage the already fragile ecosystem with serious consequences for health. According to WHO, she said, an urgent comprehensive survey was needed to assess the situation and to find ways of mitigating the effects of war on health and on the environment.

The press officer further reported that the Director-General of WHO, Hiroshi Nakajima, had just returned from a visit to three refugee camps in Iran. She said that Dr. Nakajima quoted Government sources in Iran as saying that there were 30,000 evacuees from Iraq reflecting a serious situation in southern Iraq. He said that the refugees appeared to be well cared for by the Iranian authorities.

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United Nations relief supplies which had been prepositioned in the north of the country, where refugee arrivals had been anticipated, were being moved to southern Iran, the press officer said.

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CORRECTION: Monday Highlights erroneously refers to two different missions having arrived in Kuwait, indicating that the Secretary-General's humanitarian mission led by Under-Secretary-General Martti Ahtisaari had arrived in the country.

The headline should read as follows:

- United Nations special mission arrives in Kuwait; holds sectoral discussion with Kuwaiti officials and visits sites critical to its mandate.

The mission being described in the story is the special mission led by former Under-Secretary-General Abdulrahim Farah.